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Linguistic purism and language criticism in German

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Abstract. Linguistic purism is a form of language criticism. Its primary objective is to 'keep the language pure'. Keeping the language pure first of all refers to the rejection of foreign-language influences, especially in lexis, but attempts to develop a norm as well as the advancement of a standard or national language are also part of linguistic purism. Linguistic purism can be promoted by individuals as well as by institutions. First attempts at trying to keep the German language pure date back to language societies in the 17th century. From a diachronic perspective, purism has focused on different aspects of language and its usage. What all puristic efforts have in common is that they are usually linked to a rise in national sentiment. Despite institutional efforts – and contrary to other languages – purism is not part of the German language policy and thus not government-controlled.

Keywords

linguistic purism, pure language, standard language, national language, foreign-language criticism

General

Linguistic purism is an essential form of language criticism and is sometimes referred to as linguistic purification. It opposes everything foreign in the German language, be it foreign words, loan words or violations of standard-compliant uses that stand in the way of the 'purity' of the language. One may distinguish critique of language use when language users are criticised, and critique of language structure when the alleged inadequacies of linguistic forms and structures are criticised. Language-purist actions are usually triggered by the emergence of a national sentiment or national consciousness.

"In times of great distress, all people initially and most conveniently have tried to prove their patriotism by expelling the intrusive foreigners from their mother tongue; [...]" (Mauthner 1923/24: LXXX, our translation)

“Linguistic purism in Germany – as in other countries – has always culminated with the emergence of a national sentiment [...]” (von Polenz 1967: 111, our translation)

In terms of this nationalistic aspect, linguistic purism was initially mainly motivated by the attempt of establishing a standard on the basis of the different regional varieties and with that to develop a new German national language as well as a German academic language. Since the beginning of the 19th century (Napoleon/*Rheinbund*) – and to this day – linguistic purism has been a means to consciously dissociate foreign (linguistic) influences, especially in lexis. Until the middle of the 20th century French was a central issue, which for instance Eduard Engel's *Verdeutschungsbuch – Ein Handweiser zur Entwelschung* documents demonstrably. From the middle of the 20th century on, linguistic purism has focussed on the use of Anglicisms. Language-puristic activities used to be and often still are organised by language societies and language associations (see HESO, volume 4 in preparation), but also by individuals as well as the media.

German linguistics of the 20th and 21st century counters linguistic purism with theories of language change (see Plewnia/Witt 2014).

Historical

According to Kirkness (1989: 407ff.), effective linguistic purism in German is divided into three periods, two longer periods and one transitional. These periods are closely connected with the (national and) political status quo and changes thereof.

The first phase in the 17th–18th century (which is marked by the beginning of nation-state building in Europe, but also by the scattered regionalism in Germany after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648) is characterised by standardisation and the establishment of a unitary national language as well as of an independent literary language. The goal is to counteract the supremacy of French and Latin. Linguistic purism is not limited to lexis but also concerns regional forms, word formation and syntax (e.g. Justus Georg Schottelius (1612–1676) and Johann Christoph Adelung (1732–1806)), the general language norm (e.g. Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766)), and German-language literature (e.g. Philipp von

Zesen (1619–1689)). The most important language society that wanted to advance the standardisation of German at this time was the *Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft* (1617–1680), following the example of the Italian *Accademia della Crusca* (see HESO, volume 4 in preparation).

The transitional phase from the first to the second period is framed by the French Revolution (1789) and the Carlsbad Decrees (1819). During the French Revolution and the following Napoleonic times, the German national language and the literary language are consolidated and become the “mirror of the nation” (Kirkness 1989: 410, our translation) within “linguistic nationalism” (von Polenz 1999: 266, our translation). Especially loan words from French are now increasingly in the centre of criticism. Joachim Heinrich Campe’s (1746–1818) *Wörterbuch zur Erklärung und Verdeutschung der unserer Sprache aufgedrungenen fremden Ausdrücke* (1801) is the most famous language-puristic work of this time. Many of his lexical ‘Germanisations’ have endured to this day, such as *Zerrbild* (‘distorted picture’) for *Karikatur* (‘caricature’); others were denied being included in the vocabulary, such as *Zwangsgläubiger* (‘forced believer’) for *Katholik* (‘Catholic’) (see Kirkness 1975: 157, 167). However, Campe’s purism was not motivated by a patriotic or nationalistic mindset but rather by his aspirations to educate in the spirit of the *Aufklärung*.

The third period, the 19th and 20th century, is characterised by purism against foreign words. The purism of this period serves a return to ancient linguistic heritage, the consolidation of the newfound national language and keeping the latter pure from foreign influence (see Schiewe 1998). The trend of critically focussing on the use of foreign words became intentional and institutionalised after the establishment of the German Reich in 1871. The protagonist of this movement was the German Language Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein*, ADSV), founded in 1885. Until its disbandment, pressured by a decree of the National Socialists in 1940 (see Kirkness 1975: 396), it programmatically offered critique of foreign words: “No foreign word for what can be well expressed in German.” Its efforts reached their inglorious summit during National Socialism by calling itself the “SA of our mother tongue” (both quoted by von Polenz 1999: 271 and 277, our translation). Its self-imposed task was facilitated by the opportunity to cooperate with the authorities of the Third Reich. After the second world war, during times of economic crisis and a rather weak national sentiment, the Society for the German Language (*Gesellschaft für*

deutsche Sprache, GfdS) was founded in 1947 as successor organisation of the ADSV, representing a much more moderate linguistic purism that may rather be described as a caring for language culture.

Present

Whether there is a fourth, a current period that has come into existence since the emergence of a new national consciousness after German reunification in 1990 needs further investigation. At least in 1999, von Polenz did not find any signs of it:

“Even in the times of a ‘conservative turn’ in the 1980s and the search for a ‘national’ identity since the reunification in 1990, there has been no new trend towards foreign-word purism.” (von Polenz 1999: 287, our translation)

Pfalzgraf, however, observes a “neo-purism” that has developed since 1990:

“These days one may speak of a revival of a German linguistic purism (= neo-purism). [...] This neo-purism is connected with the German reunification.” (Pfalzgraf 2006: 304, our translation)

Regardless of whether anything like a neo-purism exists in German or not, the critique of Anglicisms is still present and has increased over the last years, be it in the public debates about the use of Anglicisms in advertisements for large companies such as Telekom or the Deutsche Bahn AG in the media, or due to the activities of the registered association Deutsche Sprache e.V. since 1997, which has been distinctly criticising Anglicisms under the label of language cultivation.

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